The Millennial Temple--Ezekiel 40-48

The Millennial Temple of

Ezekiel 40-48

(An Exercise in Literal Interpretation)

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Those who have discovered that *the key to interpreting God's Word properly* is to understand it in a normal/literal way, will also discover that Ezekiel 40-48 is not a burden to the Bible student, but a delight. What joy God brings to the heart of the believer when he realizes, perhaps for the first time, that God did not give us any portion of His Word to confuse us, but rather to enlighten us. God really does mean what He says!

The last nine chapters of Ezekiel serve almost as a test case for God's people. In the words of Charles Lee Feinberg, a great Old Testament scholar of the 20th century, “Along with certain other key passages of the Old Testament, like Isaiah 7:14 and 52:13-53:12 and portions of Daniel, the concluding chapters of Ezekiel form a kind of continental divide in the area of Biblical interpretation. It is one of the areas where the literal interpretation of the Bible and the spiritualizing or allegorizing method diverge widely. Here amillennialists and premillennialists are poles apart. When thirty-nine chapters of Ezekiel can be treated detailedly and seriously as well as literally, there is no valid reason a priori for treating this large division of the book in an entirely different manner." (*The Prophecy of Ezekiel*. [Chicago: Moody Press, 1967], p. 233).

God will fulfill His covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God's "chosen people" will enjoy their "promised land" some day, after they have experienced national regeneration (Jer. 31:31-34; Rom. 11:25-26). Not just for the Church, but also for Israel, "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29).

We now present seven arguments in support of, and three arguments in opposition to a literal interpretation of Ezekiel 40-48.

Arguments in Support of a Literal Interpretation

1. A careful reading of Ezekiel 40-42 gives one the clear impression of a future literal Temple for Israel because of **the** immense number of details concerning its dimensions, its parts and its contents (see Erich Sauer, *From Eternity To Eternity*, chapter 34). Surely, if so much space in the Holy Scriptures is given to a detailed description of this Temple, we are safe in assuming that it will be as literal as the Tabernacle and the Temple of Solomon. The fact that its structure and ceremonies will have a definite symbolical and spiritual significance cannot be used as an argument against its literal existence. For the Tabernacle was a literal structure in spite of the fact that it was filled with symbolic and typical significance. Such reasoning might easily deny the literalness of Christ's glorious Second Coming on the basis that the passages which describe His coming are filled with symbolical expressions (see Matthew 24 and Revelation 19).

2. Ezekiel was given specific instructions to "declare all thou seest to the house of Israel" (40:4), which seems strange if the Temple were to symbolize only general truths. Even more significant is the fact that the Israelites were to "keep the whole form thereof, and all the ordinances thereof, and do them" (43:11). This is an exact parallel to the pattern of the Tabernacle which Moses saw in the Mount, and which God commanded him to construct (Exodus 25:8,9).

3. All will agree that the Temple of Ezekiel 8-11 was the literal Temple of Ezekiel's day, even though the prophet saw it "in the visions of God" (8:3) while he himself was still in Babylon (8:1). In these four chapters we find mention of "the door of the gate of the inner court" (8:3), "the porch" (8:16), "the altar" (8:16), "the threshold of the house" (9:3), and "the east gate of Jehovah's house" (10:19). Now without any indication whatever than an ideal temple instead of a literal Temple is being set forth in chapters 40-42, we find similar if not identical descriptive formulas being used: "in the visions of God" (40:2; cf. 8:3), "a gate to the inner court" (40:27; cf. 8:3), "the porch of the house" (40:48; cf. 8:16), "the altar" (43:18; cf. 8:16), and "the gate which looketh towards the east" (43:3; cf. 10:19), through which the glory of the God of Israel is seen returning, exactly as He had departed, according to 10:19 and 11:23. Now if the Millennial Temple is not to be a reality, then why insist that the return of the God of Israel is to be a reality?

4. Ezekiel is not the only Old Testament prophet who saw a future, glorious Temple for God's chosen people Israel, complete with animal sacrifices, in the Holy Land:

a) *Prophecies of a Millennial Temple*:

Joel 3:18

Isaiah 2:3

Isaiah 60:13

Daniel 9:24

Haggai 2:7,9

b) *Prophecies of animal sacrifices in the future Temple*:

Isaiah 56:6,7

Isaiah 60:7

Jeremiah 33:18

Zechariah 14:16-21

5. God has definitely promised to the line of Zadok an everlasting priesthood (1 Sam. 2:35; 1 Kings 2:27,35). This confirms God's promise of an everlasting priesthood to Zadok's ancestor Phinehas (Num. 25:13), which also confirms His promise of an everlasting priesthood to Phinehas' grandfather Aaron (Exodus 29:9; 40:15). See 1 Chronicles 6:3-8, 50-53 for the full genealogy. Furthermore, this promise of an everlasting priesthood was strongly confirmed by God through Jeremiah 33:17-22, who links the perpetuity of the Levitical priests with the perpetuity of the Davidic Kingship and the perpetuity of the earth's rotation on its axis! In view of these promises of God, confirmed again and again, it is highly significant that the Millennial Temple of Ezekiel will have the sons of Zadok as its priests! (40:46, 44:15). God apparently means what He says! The intrinsic probability of this being fulfilled literally is strengthened tremendously by the mention of 12,000 Levites who will be sealed by God during the yet future seventieth week of Daniel (Rev. 7:7). If these are literal Levites it would hardly be consistent to maintain that the Temple is spiritual or figurative. And if God's promises to Aaron, Phinehas, and Zadok are spiritualized, how can we insist that His promises to David will be fulfilled literally (2 Sam. 7:13,16)?

6. The Bible clearly teaches that while there is no such thing as an earthly Temple, an altar, or animal sacrifices in true Christianity (John 4:21, Heb. 7-10), there will be such provisions for Israel following the rapture of the Church (Matt. 24, 2 Thess. 2:4, Rev. 11:1,2. Compare also Hosea 3:4,5 with Daniel 9:24,27).

Furthermore, Revelation 20:9 indicates that Jerusalem, the "beloved city," will once again be "the camp of the saints" during the millennial age. The clear New Testament teaching of a post-rapture "holy place" and "temple of God" in Jerusalem, complete with "the altar" (Rev.11:1), prepares us to anticipate a Millennial Temple in connection with the "holy city" Jerusalem, in harmony with Old Testament teaching.

7. The only real alternatives to the literal interpretation are unbelieving modernism which does not hesitate to say that this Temple was a mere figment of Ezekiel's imagination, and a fanciful idealism, usually amillennial, which says that this Temple depicts certain realities of the Church which shall be fulfilled in our times or in the eternal state. (See, for example, Beasley-Murray on Ezekiel in the *New Bible Commentary*: Revised, 1970, p. 684.) Andrew W. Blackwood, Jr., in *Ezekiel, Prophecy of Hope* (Baker Book House, 1965), believes that the centrality of the altar in Ezekiel's Temple points to centrality of the communion table in the Christian church! In light of this, Dr. Blackwood is disturbed that "in many of the beautiful Protestant churches that are being built today, the table of Holy Communion is crowded back against the wall at the greatest possible distance from the congregation, as was the medieval Roman Catholic custom. But today in the beautiful new Roman Catholic churches that are being constructed the sacramental table is brought away from the wall; so that the congregation, insofar as it is physically possible, surrounds the table. Ezekiel certainly is telling us that church architecture should be an expression of theology" (p. 240).

So widespread is this type of interpretation that even some prominent dispensationalists have been influenced by it. Dr. J Sidlow Baxter, for example, tells us that "the main meanings of the striking symbols are clear ... The various cube measurements symbolize their divine perfection. In the description of the sacrificial ritual we see the absolute purity of the final worship" (*Explore the Book* IV, 34, Academie Books, Grand Rapids, 1966). We shall leave it to the reader to decide, after studying Ezekiel 40-42 again, whether these are "clear" meanings of these "symbols." We are also very disappointed to see that even Dr. Harry Ironside, whose prophetic insight was usually very clear, fell into the same spiritualizing tendency. Notice how he attempted to spiritualize the Temple river of Ezekiel 47: "Ezekiel's guide measured a thousand cubits, that is, fifteen hundred feet, and he caused the prophet to enter into the waters: they were up to his ankles. May this not suggest the very beginning of a life of fellowship with God? 'If we live in the Spirit let us also walk in the Spirit' (Gal 5:25). The feet were in the river and the waters covered them, but the guide measured another thousand cubits and caused

Ezekiel to pass through the waters, and they were up to his knees. Who will think it fanciful if we say that the waters up to the knees suggest praying in the Holy Spirit? But the guide measured another thousand and caused the prophet to pass through the waters, and now they were up to his loins, suggesting the complete control of every fleshly lust in the power of the Spirit of God. He measured another thousand, and that which had begun as a small stream was a river so that Ezekiel could not pass through, for the waters were risen, waters to swim in. Surely this is to live in the fullness of the Spirit to which every child of God should aspire" (*Ezekiel the Prophet*, pp. 327,328, Loizeaux Brothers, 1949).

In my opinion, such an exposition of Holy Scripture is not only fanciful but dangerous, causing the student to wonder whether each expositor is not, after all, a guide unto himself, the blind leading the blind. If the commentator rejects the literal interpretation of the passage, and fails to find support elsewhere in Scripture for a consistent figurative or symbolic interpretation, he should confess his ignorance, leave the passage alone, and go elsewhere. For many centuries the Church has been subjected to various spiritualizing interpretations of Old and New Testament prophecies concerning the Second Coming of Christ. It is our prayer that God will raise up many faithful students of His Word in these last days who will search the prophetic Scriptures in the belief that God actually means what He says.

Objections to a Literal Interpretation of Ezekiel 40-48

1. "The area of the temple courts (500 x 500 "reeds," or about one square mile) would be larger than the entire ancient walled city of Jerusalem, and the holy portion for priests and Levites (20,000 x 25,000 reeds, or about 40 x 50 miles) would cover an area six times the size of greater London today and could not possibly be placed within present-day Palestine, that is between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea (Ezek. 47:18), to say nothing of the "portion of the prince" on either side of this area (45:7, 47:21). The Millennial Jerusalem would be about 40 miles in circumference and thus ten times the circumference of the ancient city. Furthermore, it would be somewhat north of the present site of the city, and the Temple area would be about ten miles north of that, on the way to Samaria! This is quite unthinkable, for such a city would not be the Jerusalem of Jewish memories and associations, and a Temple in any other locality than Mount Moriah would hardly be the Temple of Jewish hope" (J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, IV, 32).

Answer:

Israel will have the only sanctuary and priesthood in the world during the millennial age, so the Temple courts and sacred area will need to be greatly enlarged to accommodate the vast number of worshippers and the priests who will serve them (Isa. 2:3, 60:14, 61:6, Zech. 8:20-23). Various Old Testament prophecies speak of great geological changes that will occur in Palestine at the time of Christ's Second Coming, so it is not impossible to imagine a 2,500 square mile area for the Temple and city fitted into a reshaped and enlarged land. See Isaiah 26:15, 33:17, 54:2, and especially Zechariah 14:4-10. The latter passage tells us of new valleys and rivers, and a flattening of portions of land "like the Arabah" which then "shall be lifted up." Presumably the entire Dead Sea region will be lifted more than 1,300 feet, above the present sea level, for it will contain fish "after their kinds, as the fish of the great sea, exceeding many" (Ezek. 47:10). Revelation 16:20 informs us that at the end of the Great Tribulation gigantic earthquakes will cause islands and mountains to vanish. Thus, both testaments speak of topographical and geographical changes that will accompany the inauguration of the millennial kingdom. Jerusalem itself will be the capital of the world, the beloved city (Rev. 20:9), and its size will surely be proportionate to its importance. If Nineveh, the capital of one ancient empire, was sixty miles in circumference (Jonah 3:3; cf. Baxter's discussion, IV, 170), why would it be impossible for the millennial Jerusalem to be forty?

With regard to the problem of the Millennial Temple being located about ten miles north of Jerusalem, God specifically indicates to Ezekiel that the Temple area will no longer adjoin the royal palace as in the days of old (43:7-9). The point is clearly stated in 43:12 -- "This is the law of the house: upon the top of the mountain the whole limit thereof round about shall be most holy. Behold, this is the law of the house." Vast topographical changes will not make Palestine less the Promised Land for Israel, nor will a centralized, enlarged Temple ten miles removed from the city be a disappointment to Israelites who have been accustomed to thinking of it in terms of Mount Moriah. The important thing is that the glory of Jehovah will fill the Temple (43:5), and the city will be renamed on the basis that "Jehovah is there" (48:35).

2. "It is unthinkable that a system of animal sacrifices will be reinstituted after the one perfect sacrifice of Christ has been accomplished, especially in the light of Hebrews 7-10."

Answer:

While this might seem to be a most formidable objection to the literality of the

Millennial Temple, several important considerations tend to modify the force of this objection:

[1] The millennial system of sacrifices described by Ezekiel differs profoundly from the Aaronic system, so that it is not simply a reinstitution of Mosaic Judaism as many have claimed. These changes could not have escaped the notice of post-captivity Jews, such as Zerubbabel and Joshua, who, seeing the glorious context into which Ezekiel placed these new ordinances, would have realized immediately that the prophecy could only be fulfilled in the kingdom age. Therefore, they made no effort to build such a temple after the exile. Dwight Pentecost (*Things to Come*, 1958, pp. 520-524) points out that there will be no Ark of the Covenant, Table of the Law, Cherubim, Mercy Seat, Veil, Golden Candlestick, or Table of Showbread. Instead of a high priest, there will be a prince who has some royal and priestly powers, but will actually be neither king nor high priest. The Levites will have fewer temple privileges except for the sons of Zadok who will serve as priests. The Feast of Pentecost is omitted as well as the great Day of Atonement, and there is no evening sacrifice. The dimensions of the temple and courts are changed and they are removed from the city. With regard to additions that will be made, Nathanael West (*The Thousand Years in Both Testaments*, p. 429; quoted by Pentecost, p. 522) states: "The entrance of the 'Glory' into Ezekiel's Temple to dwell there, forever; the Living Waters that flow, enlarging from beneath the Altar; the suburbs, the wonderful trees of healing, the new distribution of the land according to the 12 tribes, their equal portion therein, the readjustment of the tribes themselves, the Prince's portion, and the City's new name, 'Jehovah-Shammah,' all go to prove that New Israel restored is a converted people, worshiping God 'in Spirit and in Truth.'"

The later rabbis, who lost the true significance of Old Testament prophecy, were deeply troubled by the contradictions between Moses and Ezekiel, and hoped that Elijah would explain away the difficulties when he returns to the earth! Blackwood (*op. cit.*, p. 22) cites another rabbinic source to the effect that "the entire prophecy would have been excluded from the canon were it not for the devoted labor of Rabbi Hanina ben Hezekiah, a scholar of the first century A.D., who must have written an extensive commentary on Ezekiel: 'Three hundred barrels of oil were provided for him for light and he sat in an upper chamber where he reconciled all discrepancies' (*Babylonian Talmud*, Menahoth 45a)." A similar dilemma confronts modern Christian scholars who deny a literal millennium. For example, the contributor to Ellicott's *Commentary on Ezekiel* twice insists that the prophecy cannot be literally fulfilled "except on the supposition of physical changes in the

land"; but this is exactly what the Bible tells us will happen at the time of inauguration of the millennium. Such objections, therefore, simply beg the question.

[2] Just because animal sacrifices and priests have no place in Christianity does not mean that they will have no place in Israel after the rapture of the Church; for there is a clear distinction made throughout the Scriptures between Israel and the Church. And just because God will have finished His work of sanctification in the Church by the time of the Rapture, is no warrant for assuming that He will have finished His work of instruction, testing, and sanctification of Israel. In fact, one of the main purposes of the thousand-year earthly kingdom of Christ will be to vindicate His chosen people Israel before the eyes of all nations (Isaiah 60, 61). It is obvious that the Book of Hebrews was written to Christians, and we have no right to insist that Israelites during the Millennium will also be Christians, without priests, without sacrifices, and without a Temple. Saints like John the Baptist who died before Pentecost were not Christians (John 3:29, Matt. 11:11); and those who are saved following the rapture of the Church will likewise be excluded from membership in the Bride of Christ, though they will be "made perfect" like all the redeemed (Heb. 12:23).

[3] Even in the age of grace, God deems it necessary for Christians to be reminded of the awful price that Jesus paid, through the symbolism of the bread and the cup. Drinking of this "cup of blessing" (1 Cor.10:16) does not involve a re-offering of the blood of Christ in contradiction to the Book of Hebrews, but serves as a powerful "remembrance" of Christ and a powerful proclaiming of "the Lord's death till he come" (1 Cor. 11:25-26). Likewise, in the context of distinctive Israelite worship, the five different offerings, four of them with blood-shedding, will serve as a constant reminder to millennial Jews (who will not yet be glorified) of the awful and complete sacrifice which their Messiah, now present in their midst, had suffered centuries before to make their salvation possible. In view of the fact that there may be no other bloodshed in the entire world, because of a return of semi-Edenic conditions (cf. Isa. 11:6-9), such sacrifices upon the Temple altar would be doubly impressive.

However, such sacrifices will not be totally voluntary and purely memorial as is true of the Christian eucharist. Ezekiel says that God will "accept" people on the basis of animal sacrifices (43:27), and they are "to make atonement for the house of Israel" (45:17; cf. 45:15). In other words, just as in Old Testament times, the privilege of life and physical blessing in the theocratic kingdom will be contingent upon outward conformity to the ceremonial law. Such conformity did not bring

salvation in Old Testament times, but saved Israelites willingly conformed. Only faith in God could bring salvation, and this has been God's plan in every dispensation. It is a serious mistake, therefore, to insist that these sacrifices will be expiatory. They were certainly not expiatory in the Mosaic economy ("it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins" -- Hebrews 10:4), and they will not be so in the Millennium. But their symbolic and pedagogic value, unlike the communion service, will be upheld by a legalistic system of enforced participation. For example, those who decide to neglect the annual Feast of Tabernacles will be punished by a drought or a plague (Zech.14:16-19). If the true significance of the five offerings be understood, it is not difficult to see how they could serve as effective vehicles of divine instruction and discipline for Israel and the nations during the Kingdom age. (For a detailed discussion of the theological and exegetical issues involved, see J. C. Whitcomb, "Christ's Atonement and Animal Sacrifices in Israel" (*Grace Theological Journal* 6:2 [Fall, 1985], pp. 201-217), published in abbreviated form (same title) in *Israel My Glory* 45:2 [April/May, 1987].)

3. "When we read in Ezekiel 47:1-12 of a stream that issues from the Temple and increases to a great river within a few miles with no tributaries, enters into the Dead Sea and heals it of its death, and has trees growing on its banks which have perennial foliage and fruit, the leaves being for "medicine" and the fruit, although for food, never wasting, surely we are in the realm of idealism! We find such a stream pictured in the eternal state (Rev. 21:1,2), but surely we cannot picture such a stream during the millennial age."

Answer:

Such an objection is based largely upon the fallacious notion that the supernatural aspects of eschatology (including the descriptions of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 and 22) are purely idealistic pictures. Doubtless many Jews who studied the Old Testament Messianic prophecies before the First Coming of Christ felt the same way. But when Christ came, He changed water to wine, multiplied loaves and fishes, instantly calmed a great storm, healed the sick and raised the dead (Isa. 35:5,6; Matt. 11:5). He said that those who did not believe all that the prophets spoke were "fools and slow of heart" (Luke 24:25).

In the light of these First Coming fulfillments and our Lord's strong admonition, it would seem to be the better part of wisdom to take these millennial prophecies literally. Who are we to say that there cannot be any supernatural aspects to the millennial reign of the glorified Christ on the earth? Some who deny the literality

of the Temple stream admit that Edenic conditions will largely prevail in that age, with longevity, universal peace, transformation of animal life, and blossoming of deserts. But if we consider carefully some of the conditions that existed in the Garden of Eden, we will discover that among them were trees and fruits that had super-vegetative powers and a stream from the Garden that divided into four rivers (Gen. 2:10-14). Few who deny the literality of the Temple stream of Ezekiel 47 would go so far as to deny the literality of the rivers and trees of Genesis 2. But is not this an inconsistency? Cannot God accomplish these things for His own purposes in ways which we cannot now understand? If the natural processes of our present world serve as the ultimate guide for what can or cannot happen in the age to come, we not only wipe out much of the Biblical eschatology, but end up denying even the miraculous works of Christ. This is simply too great a price to pay to maintain the idealistic view of Ezekiel's prophecies.

(For a helpful analysis of the Millennial Temple prophecy of Ezekiel 40-48, see Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel: The Glory of the Lord*. [Chicago: Moody Press, 1969], pp. 233-279).

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